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AUTHOR Von Lehmden-Koch, Cheryl A.
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ABSTRACT

A study determined attitudes of elementary teachers of grades K-6 towards the use of invented spelling. Twenty-nine teachers in two rural school districts in Northwest Ohio completed a questionnaire designed to investigate the extent of whole language use, spelling strategies taught, and attitudes towards invented spelling. Results indicated that teachers in the primary grades (K-3) were more accepting of the use of invented or phonetic spelling than the teachers in the intermediate grades (4-6). Findings suggest that teachers were not pleased with the way they actually taught spelling and that there was little correlation between how spelling was actually taught and how the teachers thought it should be taught. (Author/RS)

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Attitudes of K-6 Teachers Towards Invented Spelling

Cheryl A. Von Lehmden-Koch

Kalida Local School District

Kalida, Ohio

Running head: ATTITUDES OF TEACHERS TOWARDS SPELL

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine the attitudes of elementary teachers of grades K-6 towards the use of invented spelling. Twenty-nine teachers in two rural school districts in Northwest Ohio completed a questionnaire designed to investigate the extent of whole language use, spelling strategies taught, and attitudes towards invented spelling. Using a Pearson Correlational Coefficient, it was determined that teachers in the primary grades (K-3) were more accepting of the use of invented or phonetic spelling rather than the teachers in the intermediate grades (4-6). The study also suggested that teachers were not pleased with the way that they actually taught spelling. Teachers indicated on the questionnaire that they taught spelling differently than they thought it should be taught.

Attitudes of K-6 Teachers

Towards Invented Spelling

Much has been written about different strategies used to teach spelling. One major concern has been the traditional spelling lists and workbooks in which spelling is seen as memorizing words with no relationship to the process of reading and writing (Bartch, 1992). Novelli (1993) noticed that students performed well on weekly tests, but not long after, students forgot how to spell these words, and weren't using them in their journals or writings. Students have difficulty attaching meaning to words that they learn in isolation. Allegations like these have made educators look at other ways in which to teach spelling.

Whole Language and Invented Spelling

Although many teachers have been introduced to whole language and have easily adapted literature and process writing to their teaching styles, there is still a search for an alternative approach to teach spelling that would incorporate

whole language principles. In the early stages of the whole language movement, many believed that kids would learn to spell through the immersion in reading and writing with lots of opportunities for practice and experimentation (Bartch, 1992). Although this approach worked well for some students, others still needed strategies for spelling words. It was found that when teachers didn't model reading and writing for children, students did not discover and notice features of words, despite the use of real literature (Routman, 1993). Wilde (1990) suggested that teachers should promote wide reading and writing with the use of literature and teach strategy with respect to spelling. Children who are dependent on the teacher to spell every word correctly are unable to freely express themselves, thus stiffling creativity. Invented spelling which is an attempt by students to spell words phonetically, allows kids to concentrate on their messages without overconcern for correctness (Routman, 1993).

Although teachers allow students to use invented spelling when writing, students still need to be held accountable for basic standards, such as legible handwriting, spelling high frequency words correctly, and correct punctuation, so they can take pride in their work (Novelli, 1993). Routman (1993) noticed by the beginning of fourth grade, almost all students were spelling a core of high frequency words correctly. "While students should use invented spelling freely during the primary years, we need to expect most words to be spelled correctly as they get older" (Routman, 1993, p. 39).

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to provide evidence concerning the difference between attitudes of teachers in grades K-3 and teachers in grades 4-6 towards invented spelling and additionally find out if teachers are teaching spelling differently than they thought it would best be taught.

Methods

Subjects

A total of thirty five classroom teachers of grades K-6 in rural school districts in Northwest Ohio were asked to participate in this study. Each teacher was asked to complete a questionnaire. Twenty nine (83%) completed questionnaires were received. The mean years, of teaching experience was fifteen years, and the mean grade level taught was third grade for the sample of teachers.

Measures and Proceedures

A questionnaire approach was chosen as the most practical method for obtaining the desired information. The questions were designed to collect information such as grade level taught, years of teaching experience, extent that whole language is taught, ways in which spelling is and should be taught, extent to which phonetic spelling is modeled and used, frequency of writing conferences, and grade level that words are expected to be spelled correctly.

Attitudes towards invented spelling and whole language were measured by assigning numbers to responses on the questionnaire. A Pearson Correlation was then conducted between the items of grade level taught, the extent to which teachers let children use invented spelling, and to what extent they model invented spelling. The Pearson Correlation took into account each and every score in the three distributions mentioned above.

Results

After conducting a Pearson Correlation for the variables of grade level taught, use of invented spelling, and degree to which invented spelling is modeled, results indicated that there was a significant statistical difference that primary teachers (K-3) had more positive attitudes towards invented spelling than intermediate teachers (K-6). The correlation coefficient was -.4551 which was computed at a .05 significance level of a 2 tail test.

There was also a significant difference between how teachers are teaching spelling and how they think it would best be taught. 12 teachers reported on the questionnaire that they taught spelling using a traditional spelling book. However, 8 of those 12 teachers indicated that they thought spelling should be taught in a language arts block, 2 of the 12 teachers thought spelling should be taught in phonetic word groups, and 2 of the spelling book users chose a combination of language arts block and phonetic word groups.

Discussion

In this study, teachers in primary grades K-3 displayed more of a willingness to allow students to use invented spelling than did teachers in intermediate grades 4-6. Although the results of this study do not directly indicate why teachers of intermediate grades have a difference of attitude toward invented spelling, several possible explanations can be offered. First, older children should only be inventing new

vocabulary words, uncommon words, and words that we wouldn't expect them to spell correctly at their age or grade level (Routman, 1993). In addition, children in intermediate grades should have an understanding of useful rules and generalizations concerning the English language and an ability to proofread their written work (Wilde, 1990). Although these comments do not reflect the beliefs of all teachers, they do correlate with the majority of teachers response that students should be able to spell most words correctly by 6th grade.

Anedotal data also collected from teachers indicated what they thought of invented spelling. For example, a second grade teacher reported that "If students can't use it (invented spelling), they will only use smaller words that they can spell". In contrast, a 5th grade teacher commented that "I never use invented spelling, because I want to model correct spelling for my students". Most of the other anedotal data also collected reflected these same grade level

comments and was helpful in understanding the data.

It was also found that teachers across all grade levels taught spelling differently than they thought it would best be taught. Bartch (1992) indicated that both she and her students shared boredom as she taught spelling through weekly tests and spelling workbooks. Along these same lines the correlation between how spelling was actually taught and how it should be taught were substantailly different. Anedoctal data collected indicated that several teachers would be changing the way in which they were going to teach spelling for the following year, due to the fact that one of the schools from which teachers were sampled would be changing to whole language the following year. This may be one of the reasons for the difference between the two variables.

One limitation to this study should be noted. The sample was clearly a biased one (i.e., rural teachers from school districts in Northwest Ohio). Nevertheless, the data produced straightforward

results with important implications to the value of teaching spelling.

More reasearch is needed to substantiate the findings of this study and to explore reasons for the relationship between how spelling is taught and how it should be taught. Additionally, it would be interesting to conduct this study with teachers who were more whole language oriented. Teachers in this study responded with a mean of a "sometimes" rating when asked to what extent they taught whole language. However, the findings reported here seem to have important implcations for the potential value of invented spelling in the whole language curriculum.

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